

Guide for Theatre Majors and Prospective Theatre Majors from ATHE

How should I best prepare to enter a theatre school, college, or university as a theatre major?

Acceptance to a professional studio school or an undergraduate program in theatre is based on many considerations. These vary widely among institutions. For example, some have stringent audition or portfolio requirements prior to admission while others have open admission policies followed by thorough examinations at some point in the program to determine whether the student may continue. For specific application requirements, contact NAST accredited institutions directly. The suggestions below indicate how you can best prepare during the high school years, not what you must achieve to apply or be accepted. The advice provided describes two things: first, an ideal set of knowledge and skills goals for college-level applicants; second, competencies needed by theatre professionals as they practice the various aspects of the profession. In brief, you should learn as much as you can as early as you can.

Balance your efforts.

Intellectual and artistic curiosity is essential to successful work in the theatrical professions. A breadth of knowledge and skills is critical. If you show achievement and promise in academics as well as theatre, institutions will want to admit you and you will be better prepared for theatre study and work.

Take responsibility for your own development.

Each individual committed to the field of theatre brings a unique set of talents, aspirations, and abilities to the profession. Although you are in school and probably studying or participating in theatre, it is important to take increasing responsibility for developing your particular abilities toward your specific goals. Begin by obtaining the admission requirements of schools you may wish to attend--the earlier, the better. Ultimately, you are responsible for choices about how you use your time to prepare for your future.

Become a fluent, effective English speaker and writer.

As a theatre professional, you will rely heavily on your ability to communicate in words. Everything from rehearsals to teaching, to writing grant proposals, to negotiating, to promoting your professional interests relies on fluent English skills. Focus attention on learning to speak and write effectively.

Get a comprehensive high school education.

The theatre profession is big, but it is also part of a larger whole. Theatre both influences and is influenced by the humanities, mathematics, the sciences, the social sciences, and the other arts--architecture, dance, film, literature, music, and the visual arts. For entrance into college-level study, you are encouraged to gain a basic overview of ancient and modern history, the basic thought processes and procedures of math and science, and familiarity with works in as many of the other arts disciplines as possible. Most professionals who work with theatre comprehensively develop a particular sensibility about the connections among theatre, history, psychology, and the other arts. Understanding the basics of math and the sciences support future work in theatre technologies. Social studies are related to understanding the context for various theatre endeavors.

Learn how theatre works.

Take opportunities to learn the basics of dramatic structure, including how the various elements of theatre work together. Like so many other things in theatre, this knowledge is developed throughout a lifetime. Those who are able to get started early have an advantage. Work with your drama teachers, take classes at your local college or professional studio school, or otherwise explore opportunities to gain initial acquaintance with this material.

Master the basics.

Be sure that you know the basic terminology, the major types of theatrical work, and have read a number of important plays.

See as much theatre as you can.

You need to be familiar with far more theatre than that in which you participate. Try to see as much theatre from as many historical periods, cultural sources, and media as possible. Ask your teachers to recommend a list for you that covers the various repertoires. Try to make sure that you have seen major works of all types in the particular area of theatre that interests you. Seek more to learn the breadth and depth of the repertory than to enjoy what is already familiar. Extend your vision of what the theatre is by seeing as much professional theatre as possible, if not in your region, then in other parts of the country while you may be traveling for vacations, field trips, etc. Being familiar with the writing in national publications, such as the Sunday New York Times, will also help you extend your knowledge of the theatre. Ask your teacher to suggest publications that are suitable to your interests.

Develop your understanding of the arts.

Take every opportunity to learn about dance, film/video, music, and the visual arts. Some fields of theatre require knowledge and skills in music, dance, computing, or art and design.

Practice, practice, practice.

Whatever you do or intend to do in theatre, try to practice it as much as possible. This applies not only to performance areas such as acting and design/tech, but also to other types of work in theatre. For example, if you are interested in teaching or directing, you should try to observe and gain experiences under appropriate supervision. If you are interested in playwriting, theatre scholarship, or criticism, you should practice writing and speaking on theatre topics. No level of knowledge or skill that you can attain will be too high.

Learn to care for yourself.

Your body and mind are your instruments. It is critical to take extremely good care of both. Learn about nutrition and exercise, how to manage stress, how to prevent injury, and how to maintain healthy habits that will promote long-term health and fitness. Work closely with your physician, your parents, and your theatre teachers.

Think of everything you study as helping you become better in theatre.

As we have already said, the best theatre professionals continue to learn throughout their lives. They are always studying and thinking, always connecting what they know about theatre with their knowledge of other fields. Since you never know the direction your career will take, it is wise to spend your high school years gaining the basic ability to understand and work in a variety of fields beyond theatre. Keep theatre at the center of your efforts, but accept and enjoy the challenge of gaining the kind of knowledge and skills in other areas that will support both formal studies at the advanced level and your theatre career beyond.

What is the relationship among giftedness, arts study, and work?

Most students considering an arts major in college are considered gifted by parents, friends, and teachers. What does giftedness mean, and how does it relate to the future? This short text explores relationships among giftedness, studies in higher education, and eventual work in art and design, dance, music, theatre, or some other field.

What is giftedness in general?

The field of human action is vast, interconnected, and continuously expanding. This field contains many areas: the arts, business, science, the humanities, sports, and politics, to name a few. While most people have the capacity to gain basic access to all areas of human action, almost everyone is more gifted in one or more areas and less so in others. In general, giftedness is a recognized talent, propensity, or ability that is higher than average in a particular area of human action.

What is giftedness in the arts?

Individuals with natural abilities in one or more of the art forms are said to be gifted in dance, music, theatre, or the visual arts. Such giftedness is not easily hidden. It seeks to reveal itself through some form of expression. As interest inspires study and work, individual results continuously demonstrate the depth of giftedness.

What does being gifted mean for life and work?

As already suggested, work is carried on across the whole field of human creativity and action. Each area uses particular habits of mind, subject matter, and processes to make its particular contribution.

Since the field of human action is so vast, each component area so complex, and connections among areas next to infinite, it is important to focus on what is unique about individual people before focusing on learning, learning before focusing on the arts, the arts before focusing on careers, and careers before focusing on jobs.

It is essential to remember that the particular order and priority of things that individuals love to do and have talent for is a direct reflection of who each person is as a unique human being. This is a starting point for connecting giftedness to life and work.

What changes giftedness into professional ability?

Inborn talent or giftedness is not enough. Education and learning enable each person's gifts and affinities to be developed to the fullest extent in as many areas as possible. Giftedness must be nurtured by study, practice,

and personal development if it is to function professionally in any area of human action. In all disciplines, including the arts, this means significant effort to build knowledge and skills.

It also means sharpening the intelligences associated with that area. In the arts, this involves developing abilities to work fluently and creatively in the special logic and expression of particular art forms: competence in speech and mathematical logics must be joined by those enabling communication through movement and gesture, music, or the visual arts.

Does giftedness mean automatic success and greatness?

Not necessarily. Not even with work. Giftedness should not be confused with greatness and success. Few individuals can truly be called "great." Greatness is not the only, or even the most important, criterion for success. Just as for every J.P. Morgan there are thousands of successful bankers, financiers, and brokers; for every Beethoven, Rembrandt, Shakespeare, or Graham, there are thousands of successful and effective arts professionals. This point is important because greatness and success are regularly confused when assessing careers and jobs in the arts.

Just as there is a range of giftedness across the many areas on the field of human action, there is also a range of giftedness within areas such as the arts. Giftedness is extremely complex; thus, to be gifted, even supremely gifted, in an art form may not be enough for success, much less greatness, unless it is carried along by personal attributes that shape and guide it in productive ways. We have already mentioned willingness to work as one of these attributes; however, there are many others and it is all but impossible to plan their presence and use in advance. As is true in all professions, giftedness, capability, and personal attributes play against changing contexts of values, culture, and other conditions in the environments of specific individuals. For this reason alone, learning and skills development are lifetime tasks.

How do the arts work as professions?

The arts occupy significant territory on the field of human action. They are multi-billion dollar enterprises. They require vast numbers of talented, creative, and hard-working people. Individuals educated and trained as artists work in both commercial and not-for-profit settings. Some have executive and corporate responsibilities, some function in ensembles or on teams, others work alone. The basic components are creation and performance, education, and various support enterprises such as management, public relations, and fundraising. It is not unusual for an individual to cross these boundaries regularly.

Most of the time, work is obtained and sustained through demonstration of capability. While this is true in all professions, the arts rely more on auditions, portfolio reviews, articles, and management track records than certificates, licenses, degrees, or other indicators. The arts require professional specialists in other fields such as law, accounting, politics, and marketing. Indeed, basic conditions and services associated with any enterprise are also associated with the arts. At the same time, different arts professions exhibit different patterns of action and development. It is important to understand those patterns for the particular branch of the arts an individual wishes to pursue.

How do I know if I am gifted enough to work in an arts field? Will my educational experiences help me decide?

Remember that there is more to the arts than the "big time," that there is a need for personal integrity, artistic goodness, and success in a broad range of professions as well as for greatness. Remember that giftedness indicates something higher than average, and that the level of engagement reveals the extent of giftedness. Institutions of higher learning that care deeply about quality and comprehensiveness, and are dedicated to the present and future well-being of each student have developed standards and expectations whereby students will come to understand relationships between the extent of their giftedness and the demands of work that draws on that giftedness.

What are my chances for the "big time"?

Small. As is true in all fields, "big time" is less important than "all the time." The most critical thing is a steady flow of work and service in a good workplace. The "big time" comes--sometimes at once, more often gradually--to that very small percentage of people who benefit from a combination of remarkable proficiencies, good fortune, connections, and fortuitous timing. As is true with other fields, the arts world--the greater percentage of it--is filled with highly gifted, imaginative, productive people who have come to learn that fame, as desirable as it might be, has little to do with the nature of art, and that artistic goodness, creative integrity, service to others, and fulfillment can take place anywhere and at any level of recognition.

What is education supposed to do for me?

Education in any field is focused on developing the knowledge and skills requisite for work in that field. It also involves gaining the ability to make connections among a vast array of learnable things and to combine knowledge and skills in a variety of areas into useful tools for life and career. A good education is one that assumes the ultimate precedence of wisdom over knowledge, and knowledge over information. While encouraging steady inquiry and skill development in a specific disciplinary area of study, a good education further assumes the importance of synthesis over separation and career preparation over job training. Engagement with an education that inquires into how things are made, how they work, how they can be taken apart and reconstructed, how they can be intelligently explained, and how they interact provides access to means of creative thought, clear expression, further inquiry, and capacity to use giftedness, capabilities, and aspirations effectively. Most successful arts professionals are educated in this way. They have broad interests and multiple capacities that go beyond the particular nature of their work. Thus, they are able to balance the highest levels of professional competence with general understanding.

I am not sure which college major to pursue because I feel I have multiple talents or gifts. How can I decide what to do?

It is only natural that individuals should choose that which attracts them; that which seems to command their interest and time; in short, that which they love the most. What each of us loves is usually an indicator of the unique way in which we are "put together," of what our mission or sense of direction is. When considering vocations and a future life of work, it is important to avoid the trap of selecting and isolating those studies which may apply only to a specific vocational future, especially if that future is not clearly and deeply understood. It is far more prudent to be widely prepared than to be limited to a skill marketable only at

graduation. There is a strategic difference between being vocationally trained and comprehensively educated.

Students who have studied in-depth what they love, and mastered it along with its connections to other areas of study and work are ready for far more futures and career venues than the name of their disciplinary major or any of its related subparts suggest.

What more can be said about majors and preparation for work?

It is by no means uncommon for a student educated and trained in dance, music, theatre, or the visual arts to seek and find multiple career paths outside of the arts. This is not because arts-related jobs are necessarily scarce (some are, some aren't), but because arts graduates of the kind described above are diversely capable people. What's more, the desire to make things artistically, or to bring that combination of creativity and intellect we call artistry to whatever is undertaken vocationally, never really goes away because artistic giftedness always insists on revealing itself, whatever the nature of the work at hand.

If I major in the arts, am I prepared to do anything else?

Yes. Serious study of any arts discipline develops creativity, increases intellectual skill, and provides specific insights and perspectives. Studies continue to show that individuals gifted in the arts also show higher levels of ability in other areas. Arts study is not just about art, it is about thinking, analyzing, and creating unique solutions for unique situations. These abilities can be applied across the spectrum of human action, including both work and play.

It is not unusual for individuals taking undergraduate majors in the arts to pursue other professional paths in graduate school or in the workplace. Some institutions create undergraduate programs in the arts that facilitate preparation for entering graduate programs in other disciplines. On the other hand, an undergraduate degree in one of the art forms will not prepare an individual for entry into a vocation that requires another kind of degree or preparation for entry, certification, or licensure. For example, while an undergraduate degree in dance could be preparatory to law school, the same degree would not prepare an individual to become a registered nurse upon graduation. In this case, additional studies beyond the dance degree would be required.

What if I don't want to major in the arts, but wish to continue my studies at the college level?

Most institutions offering arts majors welcome the participation of non-majors in various arts courses, performing groups, and activities. Many institutions offer minors in the arts, others offer opportunities for double majors in the context of liberal arts programs. There is no reason to give up serious study in an art form you love because you have decided to concentrate more in another area. Often, it is possible to continue private study in the art forms, work in support roles for performing groups and exhibition spaces, and otherwise contribute to the artistic and cultural life of the campus community.

Where can I get more information?

Talk with arts professionals in your local community. Ask them to discuss with you the relationships among your abilities, your aspirations for education, and the kind of work that is done by people in the field. Seek professionals who have a broad view of the arts and their particular arts discipline.

Get information from institutions and their arts programs. Talk with alumni, particularly recent graduates. Many institutional catalogs list faculty with the colleges and universities they attended. Ask local arts professionals about colleagues who went to schools that interest you. They are usually well-informed.

When you visit campuses, plan questions carefully. How do your goals for arts study match the approach of the institution? Use your perspective on issues raised in this paper as a starting point. For example, how do their programs bring specifics and generals together in the art form, or between the art form and other areas, or across all areas of study?

Through contacts with local professionals, institutions, and national organizations, get a sense of what attributes and preparations are required to enter other fields of interest.